

THE PRIVILEGE OF LIVING IN WAR-TIME

AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS TO KING'S COLLEGE
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C. F. E. S.

THE PRIVILEGE OF LIVING IN WAR-TIME

WHEN I was first asked to give the inaugural address for this session, I had intended to say something about the place of literature in our everyday life. Since then the shadow of war has fallen on us, and for a time, during the first shock of it, it seemed as if war, and all that it meant even to us here, sheltered in this island, must put every other thought in the background. The peril for our kinsmen and friends, the suffering entailed on the innocent, the dislocation of industry, the troops of stricken refugees; these cares, and the ever-present strain and anxiety which they entail, bid fair to overweight everything else, and to make it almost impossible for us to take up our daily lives and work as usual. But we have come by degrees to see that to take up our life and work is our first duty, and that being so, as we cannot take them up quite as we did before, it is perhaps of value and interest to try and see what this shock has done for us, and what place in our daily life is taken by this stern fact of war.

You may possibly think I have chosen a curious title, and that "calamity," "horror," "strain," or some such word would be better suited to what we are feeling than "privilege."

I admit that war, and such a war as we are now involved in, is a calamitous and terrible thing. Any

one with intelligence and imagination must have some conception of what the horrors of it are, and why soldiers do not care to talk about it; yet notwithstanding that, my deliberate view is that it is a privilege to live through such a time, and that it is doubly a privilege to be, what you students of King's College are, young at such a time.

Now I want to try and put before you some of the reasons why I believe this.

It seems to me that, broadly speaking, the effect of the war upon us as a community and as individuals has been chiefly in two main directions. It has produced—

- (1) An alteration of values.
- (2) A quickening of consciousness.

The alteration of values is curious and very subtle, and it is worth looking into. We have all felt in some degree, I imagine, during the past two months that what we were doing was trivial and unimportant, that the things we were in the habit of caring intensely about seemed to have lost their savour and attraction, while, on the other hand, certain less superficially attractive things increased in value and redoubled their hold on us. I know I had a curious feeling for a time as if I had been a kaleidoscope which had received a violent shake, and consequently had formed into a new pattern, and that strange pictures and fresh colours had become predominant.

What had happened was this. A stupendous reality, a great menace, had come suddenly and with terrific force upon us, and we knew that not only was our Navy and Army in peril, but that also our

own lives and liberties, our institutions, our country, and even our civilisation, were threatened.

We realised this gradually or suddenly as the case may be, but we have all realised by now that a powerful and, as it seems to us, an unscrupulous foe ardently desires our downfall and our annihilation, and will leave no effort untried to compass it.

So that into the middle of our everyday lives and our local interests and aims there has suddenly been thrust the movement of world destinies, the making and unmaking of nations and kingdoms, the most gigantic forces and changes the world has ever seen.

We are in the midst of great things and great issues. Every time we take up the paper we read of sacrifice and heroism and courage and resolution and endurance on a scale and raised to a power hitherto unknown to any of us alive. The heroic deeds of centuries seem now to be concentrated into a few weeks, and in a paragraph or two in the columns of our paper at breakfast we read of exploits and achievements which equal and even outmatch all those which have been told by historians and sung by poets right through the ages. I do not know what heroic tale of old can equal Sir John French's short official report of the terrible days of ordered retreat from Mons between August 23rd and the 26th last. "It is a plain, unvarnished tale," says Lord Roberts, in commenting on it, "of days of hard fighting, when disaster was only staved off by splendid exertions of disciplined valour." Or the deeds of another kind: the amazing gallantry of the twelve men of the Royal Engineers who one after the other raced through a deadly fire to blow

up the bridge when the Allies were retreating over the Aisne at Soissons. Eleven were killed before they reached the fuse; the twelfth man, dashing across the space where his dead comrades lay, succeeded in lighting it and sent the bridge up with a roar as a German rifleman brought him down dead. Or think of the calm courage and cheerfulness of the men of the three cruisers sunk in the North Sea; and of individual deeds like that of the nameless Irish private, which was told by a wounded corporal of the West Yorkshire Regiment, the record of which should not be allowed to die. That regiment was approaching a little village near Reims; I quote the corporal's own words—

We went on through the long narrow street, and just as we were in sight of the end the figure of a man dashed out from a farmhouse on the right. Immediately the rifles began to crack in front, and the poor chap fell dead before he reached us. He was one of our men, a private of the Royal Irish Regiment. We learned that he had been captured the previous day by a marauding party of German cavalry, and had been held a prisoner at the farm where the Germans were in ambush for us. He tumbled to their game, and though he knew that if he made the slightest sound they would kill him, he decided to make a dash to warn us of what was in store. He had more than a dozen bullets in him. We carried him into a house until the fight was over, and then we buried him next day with military honours. His identification disc and everything else was missing, so that we could only put over his grave the tribute that was paid to a greater: "He saved others; himself he could not save."

We cannot read things like that and then go out and refuse to do something which may entail a trifling discomfort, or be cross because we think some one has been disagreeable to us, with quite the same zest as we could had we not read it.

When one is up against real things like these they form a kind of touchstone, and things which are poor and trivial and unreal simply cannot exist beside them. These real things shine with so clear a radiance that for a moment at any rate, we see the others in their true light, and they are just unimportant : eclipsed.

Do you remember in Browning's *Epistle of Karshish*, the Arab physician, the account he gives of the state of mind of Lazarus after he came back from the dead ? His values had all changed—

The man is witless of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things,
Or whether it be little or be much.

So it is with us, in a lesser degree. Different standards are before us, and they affect us subconsciously the whole time.

We have before us subconsciously what people all over Europe are going through at this moment, and every now and then we get glimpses of the spirit in which they are bearing it. The millions at the front, English, French, Germans, Belgians, Austrians, Russians ; the millions bereft, or left behind in bitter anxiety ; the millions, for it probably is millions by now, plunged into poverty or utter destitution, a whole nation rendered homeless.

And the spirit shown is so magnificent, the simple heroism of ordinary men and women giving themselves for their country—the spirit which is summed up in the words which were overheard being said by one Frenchwoman to another who was seeing her husband's train off to the front : “ *Ne pleurez-pas,*

il vous voit encore."¹ In the face of this supreme courage and sacrifice we simply feel ashamed when we give expression to grievances or troubles or anxieties of the ordinary sort, they sink into insignificance; and we set our teeth and feel we must work harder than we have ever done in our lives, and so fit ourselves to be of more use in the common life.

For never has England more sorely needed trained men and women than at this moment, trained intelligence and ability and experience of every kind. That is one of the "values" which has come out most clearly in this crisis. I have always believed, passionately believed, in the importance of the training and discipline of the mind which is real education, but I never realised in its fulness its priceless worth in an organisation until the pinch of necessity which came on us in London after war was declared, and when in the course of a few weeks the market was flooded with hundreds of middle-class women workers faced with starvation. How often during those weeks of August last I thought, "If I could only make the girls and young women of this country realise the importance of training, and what a difference it makes in their value to the community at such a moment as this, if they could only see this as I see it now, I do not believe a single girl in England would allow herself to remain untrained."

When war was first declared it was splendid to see the way everybody's first thought was, "How can

¹ Quoted by Professor Gilbert Murray in the *Hibbert Journal*, October 1914, p. 70.

I help?" and they came forward asking this in hundreds of thousands, especially women, for the men's tasks were more obvious. But the trouble was that only a comparatively few were trained to do anything; and one of the stern facts of life is that, however ardently you may desire it, you cannot suddenly give service unless you have long and arduously prepared yourself to be fit to give service. The person who is untrained in habits of discipline and accuracy, who is without the standard of efficiency which specialisation in some one branch of work entails, that person, however willing, is not the one you rely on in an emergency.

Well, you King's College students are all fortunate enough to be training yourselves in some special direction, and I am sure you will make the utmost use of your years at college, for it is a very precious time—no other in your life is quite like it. And if you agree with me that one of the privileges of war-time is that by the help of its uncompromising light we are better able to distinguish true values and perspectives, I think you will also agree that one of these values is the supreme need for the training of every individual in the State, man and woman alike. Never was education, real education, more needed.

This, not only in order that each of us may carry out in the most complete way his or her share of practical work, but also that we may be as fully equipped as possible to apprehend and to judge the true significance of the mighty spiritual and mental forces which lie behind this conflict, and which direct and sustain it.

For this war is, to an extent hitherto unknown in history, a war of ideals : ideals which clash because they are radically opposed ; and the more fully each English man and woman is in a position to realise that what we in the last resort are fighting for to-day is to preserve the right to freedom of the individual mind, the more vigorous and the more effective will be our warfare.

The other main result of this shock of war on us, I think, has been, as I have said, a quickening of consciousness.

By this I mean that, owing to a number of reasons, we are living more intensely and more rapidly than usual, our whole being is quickened, our finest emotions are continually being called upon, our imagination and admiration are aroused.

One of the chief reasons why great literature is of such value to us in everyday life is that it has precisely this quickening effect, it helps us to live. Life has been defined as the power of response to stimulus, the more you respond the more alive you are, and *vice versa*. And what great literature does is this. It helps us to see with the eyes of the great makers of literature, the poets, with some portion of their vision, how much more there is in the world to respond to than we ever dreamed of before ; so that by means of literature we live more intensely, we feel more acutely, we become, in short, more fully alive. At this moment we do not need to go to books to get this stimulus, for the very stuff of literature is in being all round us. It always is, of course, the great artists always find it ; but the fact

that it is just now intensely concentrated makes it clear to the ordinary man and woman.

All of us who feel this thrill and respond to it are living literature, not only reading it, and in so far as we feel it we are all in some measure poets, though inarticulate.

Never before, since newspapers were invented, have they each day been full of literature in essence. Think, for instance, of the picture of the Indian troops landing at Marseilles in the haze of the early autumn morning; the great Rajahs and their retinues and their soldiers arriving in their tens of thousands from the East, from that ancient civilisation of India; coming over with eager zeal to help the people of this little island in the North Sea to fight for what we believe in and hold dear. It is a spectacle which must stir the most inert imagination, a spectacle unparalleled in the history of the world.

Men of the plains and hill-men, men born to warrior rôles,
Tall men of matchless ardour, small men with mighty souls,
Rulers alike and subjects: splendid the roll-call rings:
Rajahs and Maharajahs, Kings and the sons of Kings,
Bikanir, Patiala, Ratlam and Kishangarh,
Jodhpur, who rides the leopard down, Sachin and Cooch-Behar,
From lands where skies are molten and suns strike down and
parch,
Out of the East they're marching, into the West they march.¹

The pictures are endless. The Russians going into battle singing and the Germans distressed by the songs of the Russians as they fight. There was an interesting article a little while ago in *The Times*, by Stephen Graham, called "The Beauty of War."

¹ "The Indian Army," by R. E. Vernède. *The Times*, September 11th, 1914.

He gave there an account of a talk he had had with a young Russian officer who had just returned from the front with dispatches, and at the end he asks him—

“How did you feel under fire?”

“It was unpleasant at first, but after a while it became even pleasant, exhilarating. One feels an extraordinary freedom in the midst of death—with the bullets whistling round. The same with all the soldiers: the wounded all want to get well and return to the fight. They fight with tears of joy in their eyes.”

“They feel active hate towards the Germans?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. They regard them merely as the enemy, the old enemy.”

“There is a certain beauty in war, in going to death with songs,” said I.

“I would even say there is no greater beauty,” says the young officer.

That is another aspect of war, and one which should not be wholly forgotten amidst all its horror. It liberates evil and terrible passions, but it also liberates great and heroic passion, and one can understand in some measure the sense of freedom and joy which comes with the absolute relinquishment of life when fighting for a cause.

Or think of our own Fleet, and the life our sailors are leading at this moment, and have been leading for the past ten weeks; watching incessantly on those great battleships cleared of everything except necessities, ready at any moment, day or night, to be sunk by a mine or a torpedo; cheery, undaunted, resourceful. Or the stray glimpses we occasionally get of the life on a submarine, as in the following story, published by the *Daily Telegraph*, which illustrates very well the spirit of the English sailor.

It was an account of an English submarine

which was fired at by the Germans while she was scouting—

As she came to the surface her conning tower was fired at. She submerged herself, and rested on the bottom. After four hours, the atmosphere having become somewhat thick, she came up for air.

Her conning tower was again a mark for the enemy, and one shot went through. Hastily plugging the hole, she was again submerged, waiting at the bottom until it was dark, when she came up and escaped.

The young officer in command, in making his report, was asked what they did while on the mud. "I did fine," he replied; "we played auction bridge all the time, and I made 4s. 11½d."

We cannot be conscious of that sort of spirit and courage all round us and remain unmoved. It quickens our being and makes us proud we are English.

Thus we are faced on every side with this inscrutable contradiction; that war is a terrible, hideous evil, yet, not only that it is our highest duty as a nation to take part in it, but that out of it there comes, together with unspeakable ill and suffering, at the same time, the most amazing forces of good.

The truth is, this war brings home to us in a vital and concentrated form the supreme and painful mystery of life; of evil, and the good which seems to be born of it, the ever-present mystery of tragedy.

Why should a spectacle of horror and terror like the tragedy of *Lear* leave upon our minds an ennobling and even a calming effect? We know Aristotle's answer. Because it excites in us certain emotions, of pity for the sufferer, of fear—if not exactly for ourselves, then for our common human nature—and that by the excitation of these emotions we become freed from them, and so relieved and restored. We

are lifted out of ourselves into a realm of suffering on a scale greater than any we ourselves have experienced, the personal, the self-regarding drops away, the emotion becomes purged of base elements and universalised, and the whole being is purified and strengthened.

Tragedy is a confusion in the moral world, a contradiction in its elements, and we are assisting to-day at a tragedy on a scale greater than that yet depicted by any poet, ancient or modern; a tragedy of nations, awful in its magnitude. Up to the present we hold the position of spectators. We are able to lead our normal lives, sheltered and peaceful, although the shock of battle and its devastation is only a few miles removed from us.

At any moment we may cease to be spectators. In the meantime tragedy is fulfilling amongst us its ancient function, and we are left horrified and awe-struck, yet not desperate or rebellious, but even purified and uplifted. There are two sentences in Mr. Bradley's wonderful chapter on "Tragedy,"¹ which ring in my ears in these days, for they seem to sum up the extraordinarily contradictory impression left upon us by this war.

Sometimes from the very furnace of affliction a conviction seems borne to us that somehow, if we could see it, this agony counts as nothing against the heroism and love which appear in it and thrill our hearts. . . . Sometimes [there] comes a presentiment, formless, but haunting and even profound, that all the fury of conflict, with its waste and woe, is less than half the truth, even an illusion, "such stuff as dreams are made of."

It is some such conviction as this, I think, which helps us and will help us to bear what is happening.

¹ *Shakesperian Tragedy*, by A. C. Bradley, Lecture I, pp. 38, 39.

The nations are being tried to the uttermost, and the test is so searching that the way each one of us meets it now may help to affect the issue. I do not mean by the issue whether victory comes to us or to the other side, but the more important issue, the effect this is going to have on us as a people and as a race. It rests partly with us who are alive to-day to determine what the effect of this stupendous convulsion will be, to determine that we shall emerge from it with wider views and quicker sympathies, with more readiness to serve and to sacrifice, sterner and more serious perhaps, for we shall have been close to great realities, but purged and strengthened by suffering and by sorrow.

These, then, are some of the reasons why it appears to me a privilege to be living at this time. Automatically, and by the very nature of things, the trivial and the unessential is less likely to hold us than in normal times, and we are helped, even forced, to get a better sense of values and of the things that matter. In addition, our whole being is quickened because we are in the midst of stupendous issues; we are purified in the face of tragedy. And, finally, upon us who are feeling the shock of this convulsion there rests a great responsibility and a great privilege, to meet this trial in such a spirit that the memory of it and the record of it shall be for all time a source of strength and of inspiration to those who come after us.

Mr. Laurence Binyon, in the remarkable poem, written in 1901,¹ in which he foretells this war of

¹ "Europe, MDCCCI," in *The Death of Adam and other Poems*.

the nations as the result of the seed sown by Napoleon which has taken a hundred years to ripen, urges England forward to bear her part in the conflict in the spirit in which, I believe, we all wish to meet it. He urges her to contend with all her soul for—

Peace, love, truth, freedom, unto these
The way is through the storming seas.

Take up thy task, O nobly born !
With both hands grasp thy destiny.
Easy is ignorance, easy scorn,
And fluent pride, unworthy thee.
Grand rolls the planet of thy fate :
Be thy just passions also great !

Turn from the sweet lure of content,
Rise up among the courts of ease ;
Be all thy will as a bow bent,
Thy sure on-coming like thy seas.
Purge clear within thy deep desires
To be our burning altar-fires !

Then welcome peril, so it bring
Thy true soul leaping into light ;
A glory for our mouths to sing
And for our deeds to match in might,
Till thou at last our hope enthrone,
And make indeed thy peace our own.

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